

# Study on the Influence of POP MART IP Co-Branding Strategy on Stratified Consumption Behavior of Young Female Consumers in First-Tier Cities

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**Abstract.** Under the background of the vigorous development of cultural and creative industries, IP co-branding has become a key means for enterprises to enhance brand value. POP MART, as a leader in the fashion industry, through IP cooperation, to establish a "trend cultural symbol" image. Based on the blind box co-branded by POP MART and animation and art IP during 2021-2024, this study applies Identity theory to female consumers aged 18-30 in first-tier cities, and analyzes the influence of IP co-branding strategy on the purchase frequency and premium payment willingness of target consumers during the new product launch season through a questionnaire survey. The study found that IP feelings, social media communication and social attributes significantly affect consumption behavior, and there are differences in consumption behavior at different income levels. IP co-branding strengthens identity through the construction of a cultural symbol system, and differentiated consumption behaviors reflect the deep differences in social capital acquisition and emotional compensation needs of different income groups, providing a theoretical basis for cultural enterprises to implement precision marketing.

**Keywords:** POP MART; IP co-branding strategy; Identity theory; Stratified consumption behavior.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Blind Box Consumption

In recent years, blind box consumption, as an important branch of the cultural and creative industry, is booming and has become a high-profile consumption phenomenon. Blind box refers to the toy box that consumers can not know the specific product style in advance, and its contents are usually the peripheral of animation, film and television works, or the doll designed by the designer alone. Blind boxes make use of consumers' curiosity for unknown things to stimulate the desire to buy and re-buy through uncertainty and unexpectedness. In addition to POP MART, 52TOYS, TNTspace, Ruolai and other brands have also launched blind box products. Among them, POP MART is a trend culture and entertainment brand founded in 2010, incubating and developing MOLLY, SKULLPANDA and other well-known IP, and through the operation system with "Despicable Me", "SpongeBob Squarepants" and other well-known IP, to create the IP image and products in the field of trend culture.

Among the many blind box brands, POP MART's influence is particularly prominent, and its marketing strategy and consumer behavior research have also attracted much attention. Through empirical research, He Shuhui and Li Juanjuan reveal that women aged 18-34 account for 81% of blind box consumer groups, and their consumption behavior is significantly driven by emotional compensation and social currency [1]. Qian Yingxue further found that POP MART stimulated emotional consumption under social psychology through IP co-branding strategy, and consumers' willingness to pay a premium for co-branding with high cultural fit increased by 37% [2]. From the perspective of brand strategy, Jiang Yuxiang and others emphasized that IP reserve and cross-border co-branding enhance consumer stickiness through cultural resonance and promote brand value [3]. However, previous studies mostly focused on collective consumer groups, lacking empirical studies on the purchase frequency and premium payment willingness of specific consumer groups in the new product launch season.

## **1.2. Identity Theory**

Identity theory (Identity) and the communication mechanism of Key Opinion Leader (KOL) in the field of social media provide complementary and in-depth perspectives for analyzing stratified consumption behaviors. Tajfel's Identity points out that individuals build their identity by consuming goods with cultural symbolic attributes based on the needs of group belonging, self-expression and social differentiation [4]. In this process, commodities are endowed with symbolic meaning beyond practical value, and become an important medium for consumers to define themselves and integrate into the group in the social network. Based on Identity, Wu Yueqi proposed that blind box consumption realizes the identity of youth subculture through the construction of an interest community, and this symbolic consumption behavior has significant circle characteristics [5]. However, the application of Identity mostly stays at the macro level, and fails to reveal how IP co-branding affects the hierarchical behavior of consumers. In response, Wu Chunqiong et al. showed that Kols, as opinion leaders in the era of social media, reshaped the communication mode of consumption information in the digital age by means of ideographic, guiding and personalized symbol strategies [6]. In the consumption scene, KOL associates commodities with specific cultural values and group identity through content creation, and endows commodities with symbolic value; With the help of circle communication, the emotional resonance of fan groups is triggered to further strengthen this value. These two sets of theories complement each other, providing theoretical support for POP MART's social marketing strategy, exploring the impact mechanism of IP co-branding on stratified consumption, and building a comprehensive and systematic theoretical framework.

## **1.3. Research Theme**

POP MART's IP co-branding strategy makes it a leader in the blind box market. As a core group of blind box consumers, young women aged 18-30 in first-tier cities, it is significant to study the impact of the IP co-branding strategy on their purchase times and premium payment willingness. The existing researches pay more attention to the collective consumption group, and the research on the specific consumption group and stratified consumption behavior is insufficient. This study will adopt the method of questionnaire survey to collect the purchasing behavior and psychological data of the target consumer group. Through data analysis, Identity and the use of KOL, this paper deeply reveals the influence path of IP co-branding strategy on target consumers' purchase times and premium payment willingness, including the role of social interaction, identity and other factors.

## **2. Research Methods**

### **2.1. Research Object**

The target consumers are women aged 18-30 in first-tier cities. The reason for choosing them as research objects is that blind box consumption is rising in the cultural and creative industries, and this group is the core group of blind box consumption. Studies have shown that women aged 18-34 account for 81% of blind box consumers [1]. Among them, women aged 18-30 are the core group of blind box consumption, whose consumption behavior is driven by emotional compensation, social currency and other factors, which has an important impact on the development of the blind box market. The study of the effect of the IP co-branding strategy of POP MART on the purchase frequency and premium payment willingness of this specific group is helpful to deeply understand the subdivision of the blind box consumer market, and provide a basis for the precision marketing of enterprises.

The target consumers are limited to first-tier cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The first-tier cities have developed economies and diversified cultures, the trend culture spreads rapidly, consumers have more opportunities to encounter new things, and the acceptance of cultural and creative products such as tide games is high. These cities gather a large number of young consumers with strong consumption ability and willingness, and consumers of different income levels are widely distributed, which can cover a variety of consumption situations, which is conducive to studying the differences in consumption of consumers of different income levels, making the research

results more representative and universal. It then provides more accurate reference for POP MART and related cultural enterprises to develop marketing strategies.

## 2.2. Questionnaire Content

The research questionnaire designs different questions according to consumers who have purchased blind boxes and those who have not purchased blind boxes, so as to comprehensively and carefully understand the cognition, attitude, behavior and the causes behind the blind boxes of people in different consumption states, especially the blind boxes of POP MART co-branded blind boxes, and explore the potential consumer demand and market expansion direction. The questionnaire is divided into three aspects. First, it is filled in by consumers who have purchased blind boxes. It mainly focuses on the basic information of purchase, the reasons for purchase, the understanding of joint blind boxes, the purchasing behavior and the factors of purchasing decision, and is used to analyze the consumption characteristics and behavioral motivations of existing consumers. The second is filled in by consumers who have not bought blind boxes, covering the content of brand cognition, reasons for not buying, and purchase intention, so as to explore the potential conversion possibility of non-buyers. The third is the price evaluation, premium payment willingness, social sharing behavior, blind box disposal method, suggestion expectation and background information to be filled in by both groups of people. The data are comprehensively collected from multiple dimensions to provide a comprehensive basis for the related research of POP MART. The specific problems are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Consumer questionnaire.

Respondents	Content classification	Specific problem description
Consumers who have purchased blind boxes	Buy basic information	Purchase of blind box years, purchase frequency, purchase channels
	Reason for purchase	The main reasons for buying a blind box (covering various options such as design, brand awareness, price, etc.)
	Co-branded blind box to know the situation	Whether to understand POP MART and animation or art IP joint blind box and understanding degree, to know the channel of joint blind box
	Buying behavior	The number of co-branded blind boxes purchased during the 2021-2024 new product launch season and the change in the number of blind boxes purchased compared to regular blind boxes
	Purchasing decision factor	The factors (such as IP sentiment, design uniqueness, etc.) that affect the purchase decision of the co-branded blind box are ranked in order of importance
Consumers who have not purchased blind boxes	Brand recognition	The degree of understanding of POP MART brand, whether you have come into contact with the IP co-branding information of POP MART and the contact situation
	Reasons not to buy	Main reasons not to buy blind boxes (such as high price, lack of interest, and other options)
	Purchase intention	Factors to try to buy, the possibility to consider buying POP MART products in the future
All researchers	Price evaluation	Reasonable evaluation of the price of POP MART regular blind box
	Willingness to pay premium	The highest percentage premium willing to pay for a new season co-branded blind box
	Social sharing behavior	Willingness to share on social platforms after purchasing a co-branded blind box

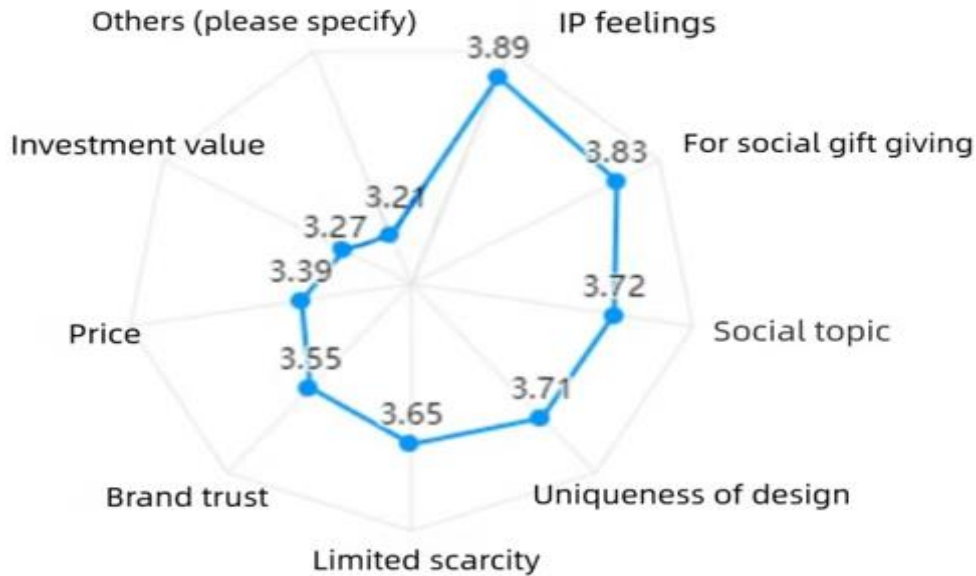
	Blind box disposal method	Disposal method after purchase of joint blind box (such as collection without unpacking, unpacking display and other options)
	Proposed expectation	Suggestions or expectations for POP MART's future cooperation with IP to launch co-branded blind boxes
	Background Information	Gender, age, city of residence, occupation, monthly income (living expenses)

### 2.3. Questionnaire Delivery

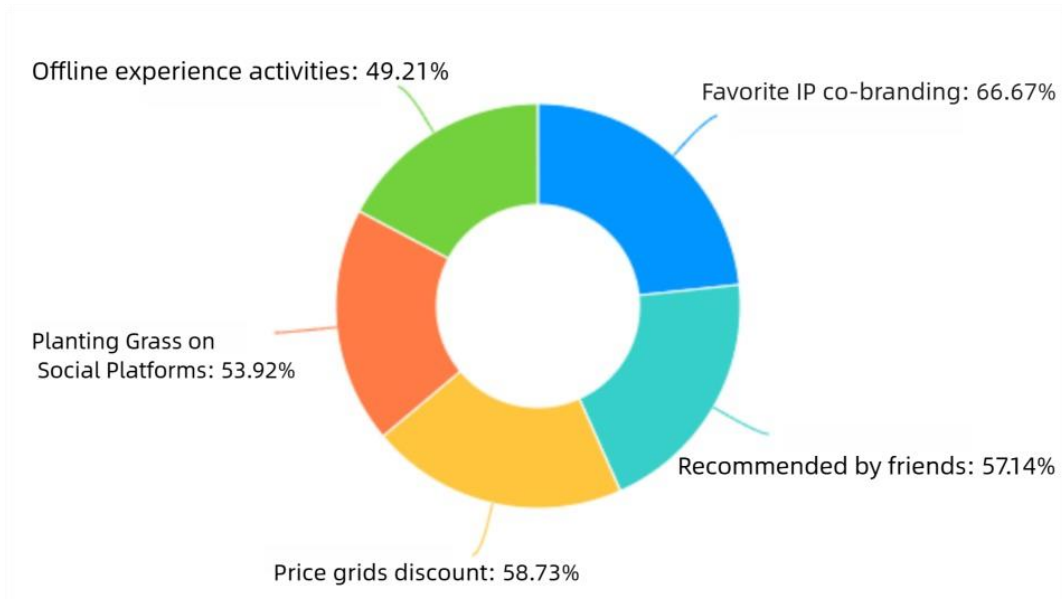
The questionnaire survey was completed using the platform of SoJump and distributed through popular social media platforms such as WeChat Moments, Xiaohongshu and Weibo. A total of 377 questionnaires were collected, of which 237 were valid, with an effective rate of 62.86%.

## 3. Research Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. IP Feelings Become the Main Purchase Factor



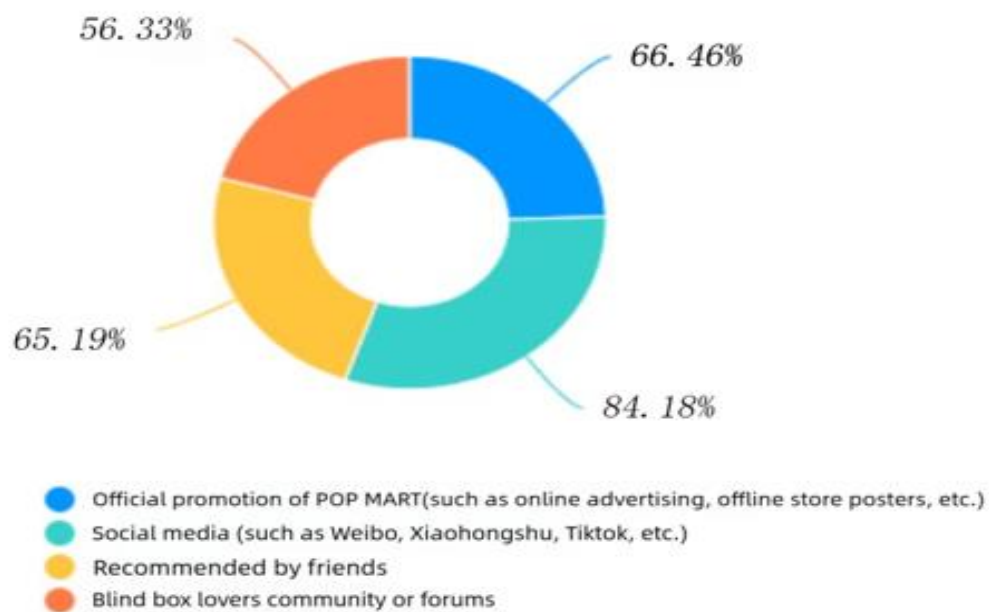
**Figure 1.** Factors that influence co-branded blind box purchasing decisions.



**Figure 2.** Factors that motivate non-consumers to try to buy a co-branded blind box.

As shown in Figure 1, among those who have purchased POP MART, "IP feelings" is the top factor affecting the co-branded blind box purchase decision. As shown in Figure 2, 66.67% of the people who have not made a purchase regard "favorite IP co-branding" as a driving factor for purchase. A study found that POP MART inspires consumers' emotional consumption through IP co-branding strategies and increases their willingness to pay a premium for co-branding with high cultural fit [2]. Consumers generate emotional resonance and cultural belonging through their favorite IP or artistic style, which is in line with the view in Identity that individuals construct self-identity through consumption of specific cultural symbols. This emotional connection is essentially a process of social identity marking completed by individuals through consumption symbols. When the values represented by IP are consistent with the values of consumers themselves, consumers express their identity through the purchase and use of co-branded products. At the same time, collaboration between POP MART and IP can arouse the emotional memory of consumers, so that consumers can identify with the joint product because of the emotional resonance, and use it as a way to express personal feelings and identity. Consumers strengthen their identity within a specific cultural circle by purchasing blind boxes co branded with their favorite IPs.

### 3.2. Social Media Dominates Information Dissemination



**Figure 3.** Understanding the channel of co-branded blind box.

As shown in Figure 3, 84.18% of the population obtained joint information through social media such as Xiaohongshu and Tiktok, which reflected the success of POP MART's online marketing strategy in reaching the target group, and also highlighted the powerful and efficient role of social media in the current information dissemination. In addition, nearly 60% of people will share the purchase of co-branded blind boxes on social platforms, indicating that social platforms have become an important place for consumers to strengthen their identity. By displaying the consumption results of cultural symbols, consumers gain enhanced identity in group interaction. Consumers display blind boxes on social platforms, communicate and interact with peers, further integrate into the blind box consumption circle, and consolidate their own identity. At the same time, KOL plays a key role in social media communication, and the first-half financial report of POP MART 2024 pointed out that the rise of content e-commerce has strengthened consumer purchasing efforts and driven the growth of the blind box economy [7]. Many consumers pay attention to KOL's evaluation and recommendation of the blind box, and the positive evaluation of KOL may prompt consumers to buy, affecting the number of purchases and the acceptance of premium.

### **3.3. The Core Role of Social Attributes and Identity Expression.**

As shown in Figure 1, "For social gift giving" and "Social topic" ranked second and third, respectively, among purchasing decision factors. A study suggests that the blind box has social properties, becoming a topic of conversation and a gift for people in social situations [8]. Users use the co-branded blind box as social currency, which is essentially an emotional investment of group identity, used to maintain friendships or workplace relationships, and effectively communicate in social scenes with the help of IP emotional attributes. Through the transmission of cultural symbols, this kind of social behavior establishes a reciprocal network of identity in the community of interest. When consumers own and display these products, they can connect with others with similar interests and form social interactions that strengthen their sense of identity. In the Quyuan community, through sharing, exchanging blind boxes and other behaviors, consumers find a sense of belonging and clarify their identity in the group. Middle and low income groups may rely more on this social way to meet social needs and identity needs, which affects their purchasing behavior.

### **3.4. Consumer Behavior Differences at Different Income Levels**

Among the high-income people with a monthly income of more than 12,000 yuan, 90% believe that the regular model is reasonable in price, but only 15% are willing to pay a premium of more than 30%, and only 25% of the people have bought four or more co-branded blind boxes during the new product launch season. This is at odds with the expected high frequency of purchases and willingness to pay, and may be a sign of caution against over-marketing or a rational assessment of brand value. According to Hu Xiaochun's research, high-income people pay more attention to the quality, experience and individuation of consumption, and pursue the matching degree between products and their own needs. The essence of their rational consumption behavior is to actively avoid the over-symbolized group differentiation strategy [9]. KOL have relatively little influence on their purchasing decisions, and they rely more on their own judgment.

Among the low and middle income people with a monthly income of less than 5000 yuan and 5000-12000 yuan, 61% have bought four or more co-branded blind boxes during the new product launch season, and some people are even willing to pay a premium of 50%-100%. The relatively high purchase frequency and premium payment willingness of middle and low income people may be due to some limitations in the acquisition of social resources and the promotion of social status due to economic conditions, and blind box consumption provides them with a way to obtain identity in a specific circle. Jiao Qiuyu pointed out that consumers integrate into a certain group through purchasing behaviors, meet emotional comfort and social needs, and obtain a sense of belonging [10]. The recommendation of KOL has a greater influence on their purchase decisions, which may prompt them to increase the number of purchases and accept a higher premium.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study deeply analyzed the impact of the IP co-branding strategy of POP MART on the stratified consumption behavior of female consumers aged 18-30 in first-tier cities. Research has found that IP feelings, social media, and social attributes play a key role in consumption decisions. IP feelings trigger emotional resonance among consumers, prompting them to pay a premium for their favorite IP co-branded products, and strengthen the identity of specific cultural circles. Social media dominates information dissemination, not only helping brands reach target groups, but also becoming an important place for consumers to strengthen their identity, in which KOL has a significant impact on purchasing decisions. The social attributes and identity expression function of the blind box are prominent, which plays a key role in maintaining social relations and satisfying identity needs. There are obvious differences in consumer behavior among different income levels. The high-income groups consume rationally and pay attention to quality, experience and individuation. The middle and low income groups are active in purchasing, with higher purchase frequency and willingness to pay premium.

However, this study has some limitations. The sample size is small, which may not fully represent the characteristics of the target group. In terms of research scope, it is limited to first-tier cities and does not involve other cities, which is difficult to reflect the differences in consumer behavior in different cities. Future studies could expand the sample size to collect more consumer data. Broaden the scope of the study to cover different cities, dig deeper into consumer motivation and behavioral logic, so as to provide more targeted marketing strategy recommendations for cultural and creative industries.

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